

## **AP Language & Composition**

**Summer Reading: *White Teeth* (2000), by Zadie Smith**

### **General Directions**

Please purchase a copy of *White Teeth* early in the summer and read the novel over the course of several weeks. The ISBN is 0-375-70386-1. Please finish reading the book by the first day of classes in August. The written notes are optional, but do make sure that you read actively, marking the book as you go along for plot, character, and themes. The AP Language teachers will begin the course with this novel. It is not just summer reading but also the foundation of the course for the year. After several days of discussion, your teacher will give you a test over the book. This test grade will count as the first grade of fall semester. If you have any questions, contact Mrs. Durlin at [mdurlin@paceacademy.org](mailto:mdurlin@paceacademy.org).

### **Introduction to *White Teeth***

*White Teeth* is a horse of a different color, a brilliantly but eccentrically structured novel about a lot of different ideas. In a nutshell, Zadie Smith tells the stories of two families in North London whose lives are interwoven. On the one hand there's Archie and Clara (Jamaican), who produce a daughter named Irie. On the other, there's the Iqbals: Samad, Alsana, Magid, and Millat. Archie and Samad served together toward the end of WW II, hence the connection. A third family, the Chalfens, begins to interact with and complicate the lives of these two families part way through the novel. Of all the new novels that have been introduced to the AP reading list over the years, this is the single most well-loved and recommended. Almost everybody likes *White Teeth*.

The novel is remarkable first off for its voice. Zadie Smith is a sort of post-modernist and writes in a "come-as-you-are" way. To begin with, her characters actually speak and think in the colloquial way modern people live, to the point that an unthoughtful reader might say, "this is barely literature." In addition, no subject or area of life is taboo; she is equally candid about and satirical of serious issues like racism, Eurocentrism, feminism, drugs, religion, and sex. And all of this is treated in a wildly comic way, as if nothing really mattered. If you mistake her tone, you will be offended. Chances are, though, you will be laughing too much to feel very offended for very long. Best to check your sensitivities at the door!

One might jump to the conclusion that nothing is therefore sacred. This would be an error, since Smith does have committed passions. For example, through satire and comedy she exposes the hypocrisies, phobias, and craziness associated with genetic engineering, cultural prejudices, do-gooder condescension, extramarital affairs, and so on. *The integrity of the individual is sacred;* the institutions and traditions that would control, taint, or otherwise deny or mess with one's true identity are not.

As you might expect, the novel has a tricky, seemingly convoluted structure. Its plot does not proceed chronologically, but instead takes the reader on a sort of tour of history as it concerns these people. Think of yourself as turning pages in a photo album, and the pictures are arranged in terms of their overlapping influence on the pictures around them, instead of providing a chronological look at a character's life, or a thematic sequence. The best ways to enjoy this are (1) to trust Smith, to put yourself in Smith's hands, and (2) be creative and alert, ready to connect a dot on page 23 with a dot on page 289.

Smith is heavily concerned with chronology, but, as mentioned earlier, deliberately plays with the whole idea of chronology in order to thwart the reader's predisposed attitudes toward time, cause-and-effect, etc. (This is a typical post-modernist ploy.) So, to keep up with her breathless pace and seemingly random switching around, read actively, marking the text as you go with the method that works best for you: underlining, yellow highlighter, post-its, and so forth.

The bottom line is, enjoy *White Teeth* thoughtfully. It asks a lot of readers, but it delivers pleasure by the ton.

## Reading Guide for *White Teeth*

*Directions: These notes are not required, but they provide you with a guide for the best reading experience. Your marked text and these notes will enhance our discussions in the first week of classes and help you on the summer reading test.*

1. In addition to marking the text for the elements discussed above, construct a timeline for the novel. A chronology is crucial in keeping the plot straight as it veers wildly through past, present, and future. Also, a timeline will help you keep all the characters straight. For example, Chapter One begins in the early morning of January 1, 1975, as Archie Jones, distraught over his recent divorce, attempts suicide while parked in an illegal loading zone outside the Hussein-Ishmael halal butcher shop. After Mo saves Archie's life, Archie realizes that "Life has said Yes" to him for the first time. He drives exuberantly to the nearest party and meets Clara Bowden. The rest is history: "Clara was nineteen. Archibald was forty-seven. Six weeks later they were married." You take it from there. Tip: what is the earliest date given in the novel? Why is it important?
2. Mark the text for characters, especially where they first appear. Also mark key passages that seem to sum up a character and show how he/she changes. Write 5-10 page numbers for the following major characters: Archie Jones, Samad Iqbal, Clara Bowden Jones, Alsana Iqbal, Magid Iqbal, Millat Iqbal, Irie Jones, Josh Chalfen, Joyce Chalfen, Marcus Chalfen, and Hortense Bowden.
3. One of the amusing structural devices in *White Teeth* is the series of teeth jokes, some in the chapter titles. Keep track of the teeth references and write page numbers where the best examples occur.
4. Humor is an individual thing, but let's see what really had us laughing in this book. Select some passages that you think are particularly funny and mark them in the book.
5. Study Questions: These twenty questions provide a good overview of the novel. Mark passages that give the answers as you read the book.
  1. Why does Clara Bowden marry Archie Jones?
  2. Describe Samad Iqbal's job and his attitude toward it.
  3. What (briefly) is the story of Mangal Pande, and why is it so important to Samad?
  4. Describe Samad and Archie's experience together in World War II.
  5. Describe Samad's extra-marital affair--who, where, why.
  6. As children, both Millat and Magid are difficult for their father to deal with. Give a couple of examples why.
  7. Describe O'Connell's Poolroom and explain its appeal for Archie and Samad.
  8. Why does Samad send his son Magid back to India to be raised?
  9. How does Alsana punish her husband for separating her from one of her sons?
  10. What kind of teenager is Millat? Give some examples.
  11. Describe the relationship of Irie and Millat as teenagers.
  12. What is Josh Chalfen's social position at Glenard Oak School? Why?

13. Why do Irie and Millat begin spending all of their afternoons after school at the Chalfen home?
14. Explain the appeal of “Chalfenism” for Irie.
15. Why does Millat join KEVIN?
16. Why are Hortense and “Mr. Topps” so busy all the time?
17. How does “the return of Magid Mahfouz Murshed Mubtasim shake the houses of Iqbal, Jones, and Chalfen”
18. What is Future Mouse ? To whom is it so offensive, and why?
19. Why does Josh Chalfen join FATE?
20. How can Archie be seen as the unlikely hero of the end of the book, ie., the climactic events of Dec. 31, 1992?